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A UAW Fight for Product Quality

Abstract

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Emphasizing the relationship between product quality and job security, UAW Local 1249 mounted an internal organizing campaign that focused on the company's long-standing indifference to quality control. This campaign could serve as a model for other local unions looking for ways to fight mismanagement.

Keywords

UAW, Arkansas, auto supply, union organizing, product quality



A UAW Fight for Product Quality

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Emphasizing the relationship between product quality and job security, UAW Local 1249 mounted an internal organizing campaign that focused on the company's long-standing indifference to quality control. This campaign could serve as a model for other local unions looking for ways to fight mismanagement.

UAW 1249 represents about 300 workers at the Randall Company (a division of Textron) in Blytheville. The plant produces hub caps, trim and other automotive parts for assembly plants throughout North America. UAW members there have worked without a contract since 1977, when management broke a strike by hiring replacements and then engineered an unsuccessful decertification election. Since that time Randall has continued its

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union-busting campaign, for which it has been cited for numerous labor law violations and ordered to pay \$280,000 in fines and backpay. The company refused to bargain until a 1984 court decision forced it to return to the table.

In early 1984, with the help of then UAW Region 5 Assistant Director Jerry Tucker, the local began to mount a campaign to build union membership with the ultimate goal of winning a collective bargaining agreement. At that time it had fewer than 20 dues-paying members. The company had not honored the dues check-off clause since the 1977 strike, and hand-collecting was hampered by Randall's policy of disciplining union activists. Wages averaged only \$5-an-hour.

Despite the low wages, the union leadership did not make economics its main organizing issue because the company had successfully linked higher wages to the threat of a plant closing. Instead, it focused on three basic issues: the general benefit of working with a union contract, health and safety, and product quality.

The local leadership felt a campaign focused on Randall's cavalier attitude toward product quality would appeal to the workforce. Rumors that the plant was in danger of closing had been circulating for some time, and union leaders feared that Randall's lack of commitment to quality would turn rumor into reality. Aware that auto manufacturers were reducing the number of suppliers and emphasizing quality as a decisive factor in the placement of future orders, the union argued that job security depended on product quality and on cooperation between labor and management. Real cooperation, it argued, was not possible without the protections provided by a union contract.

Realizing that management was unwilling to assume responsibility for quality, the union had to develop a means to verify union and employee commitment to quality. The local leadership formed a union "quality audit team," handpicking workers from throughout the plant who could be trusted. Trust was essential at this early stage because management had previously infiltrated union meetings.

Meeting at least once a week for two months before it was fully organized, the initial audit team was made up of 30 workers (a full 10% of the workforce), with representation from each shift in all key areas of the plant. Once organized, these workers began wearing UAW caps and T-shirts with the slogan "Safety, Quality, Union Rights."

The team's first task was to identify all products and customers, including a description of each part the plant produced, a part



Charlotte Consiglio from UAW Local 317 at Bell Helicopter in Fort Worth, Texas, at informational picket at Randall's Arkansas plant. Both Randall and Bell are divisions of Textron, and through an ESOP Local 317 members are Textron stockholders.

identification number and the number of parts shipped to specific customers per week. Having organized this complex research task, the union was ready to mount its campaign.

In a March 1984 negotiating session, the union proposed a "Joint Commitment to Quality" provision that called for the establishment of a union-management committee to work out inspection standards and discuss quality problems on a monthly basis. Randall rejected the proposal outright and maintained there were no quality problems at the plant. The union then informed management that it had formed its own quality audit teams to gather information about instances where management ignores quality principles.

Anticipating retaliation by Randall, the union set up a Solidarity Fund to provide financial assistance to members who were disciplined. Besides soliciting weekly in-plant contributions, the local made an appeal to other Region 5 UAW locals that produced more than \$16,000.

A procedure was developed for monitoring product quality. When defective parts were run, audit team members were instructed to bring substandard products to the attention of management. Only when the company took no action were members to record the incident. The local devised a code of 39 possible defects so that the particular quality problem could be

recorded. At the end of each shift, slips of paper with the information were submitted to the person keeping a master record.

As this information was systematically gathered, the union was shocked at the magnitude of the quality problem. The job proved too big for one person, and a code sheet was then devised for each audit team member. The sheet, which was tallied off company property, allowed the auditor to quickly record the model, part number, description, quantity, date and defect at the end of each shift.

The union informed the company that it was keeping quality records and had found a major quality problem at the plant. The union indicated that if there was no movement by the company to improve quality, the forms would be shown to Ford and General Motors. The company never asked to see the records and claimed that Ford and GM didn't care if the parts they were buying came from a UAW plant or not.

During UAW-GM negotiations in the summer of 1984, the UAW proposed a supplier stability clause, enabling the union to bring to GM's attention any quality or labor relations problems at parts supply plants. When GM claimed that existing quality control procedures were adequate, the UAW produced a stack of materials from the quality audit team at Randall. After verifying the accuracy of the reports, GM agreed to a letter of understanding on the parts supplier proposal.

In July 1984 Randall called employees together in small group meetings and informed them that the company had received more than 700 quality complaints from various customers. The company announced the installation of suggestion boxes to address the problem and threatened that if improvements were not forthcoming, the plant would be forced to close.

These developments fueled the resolve of union members. The campaign reached a fever pitch in early October when UAW members from Bell Helicopter (also a subsidiary of Textron) in Forth Worth, Texas, travelled more than 500 miles to conduct an informational picket at the Randall plant. Through an employee stock ownership plan, the Bell workers are Textron shareholders, and in that capacity they protested the mismanagement at Randall.

Richard Price, Randall Division President, personally responded to the union campaign. In small group meetings with employees in late November, he blamed the plant's quality problems on worker sabotage. Price implied that the union was responsible and urged workers to identify the culprits and call a "crime stoppers" hotline. He also declared negotiations at impasse and announced an immediate 40-cent-an-hour raise and scheduled raises of 40

cents for each of the next two years.

Randall workers, who hadn't had a raise in four years, regarded this as a union victory. In late 1984, 85% of the workers had signed union cards and more than 100 were regularly paying dues.

Randall's quality problems continued and discussions were held between the company and Ford and GM. Randall requested copies of the documents the UAW had provided GM, and when provided, the company used handwriting experts to identify the author. A union officer was subsequently discharged for allegedly supplying information to Randall customers detailing defective parts shipments. The officer has filed a wrongful discharge suit and the company has filed a countersuit seeking \$42 million in damages.

While the quality campaign did not bring a complete victory, it did succeed in mobilizing the workers and inducing a wage increase, and members are hopeful that the resolution of the lawsuits will result in a contract settlement.

UAW 1249's experience shows the potential of local union campaigns around product quality and other problems generated by mismanagement. The union's work in Blytheville also establishes some initial guidelines for a quality campaign, which we might sum up as follows:

- Before considering a quality campaign, talk with your union's legal counsel.

- A quality campaign is a grass-roots program and can't be rushed into. Members of the quality audit team must trust each other and be willing to assume the risk and sacrifice involved. Solidarity Funds should be established to diminish the intimidation value of disciplines.

- Sophisticated record-keeping capabilities must be developed, as a systematic method of recording and analyzing information can make or break a campaign.

- The local must have a plan for utilizing the information once it is compiled. The information itself is useless if you don't know what to do with it.

- Paperwork should be processed away from the worksite, making it more difficult for the company to single out and discipline one person in order to destroy the campaign. As much as possible, communications about the campaign should be verbal and in-person. ■